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ABSTRACT

Two education professors conducting research on the curriculum planning at a high school near Boise (Idaho) found that their status as observer and/or participant in discussions among teachers, administrators and parents made things more difficult. Usually in ethnography it is assumed that the hard part is to achieve insider status--to be accepted enough to be confided in, or to be let in on the inner workings of the "culture." During the first semester of observation, the professors attained insider status without difficulty. In the second semester, though, their experience underscored how important it is to maintain outsider status too; in fact, of the two, it seems the harder. For instance, in a discussion between teachers and parents, a teacher turned to one of the professors and essentially asked for validation--the teacher perceived the researcher's role as that of a redeemer. In order for research to be a success, it is very important that the researcher appear to everyone to be unallied. This is difficult, however, since some people are simply easier to get to know than others. It is natural that they would want to spend more time with "key informants." These professors did not expect to be "flies on the wall," but a few times they did find themselves pulled into power relationships and influences they mostly wanted to observe. They found themselves constantly renegotiating their relationships with all of the teachers in order to maintain an interested but neutral stance. (TB)

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ED 375 401

A paper presented at the NCTE Spring Conference in Portland, Oregon, March 12, 1994. By:

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Paper Title: An English Department as a Decision-Making Community

Part 1: A Profile of One Department as a Decision-making Community

Our talk today is based on year-long work in progress - it is only March - and we invite your responses and ideas as we move forward with this fascinating research. Bruce Robbins and I are in the middle of an ethnographic study of a high school English department, a project funded by the NCTE Research Foundation. We would like to take this public occasion to thank our sponsor for making this work possible, and to acknowledge the additional support from the English department at Boise State University where we are faculty members. Most importantly, we thank the high school English department which has allowed us to be part of them during this school year.

For our research, we have defined an English department as a curriculum decision-making community and we are attempting to understand and describe how one English department decides anything concerned with their curriculum. Some of the questions we are considering in our research include: What are the

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curriculum decisions which a department makes? What influences curriculum decisions - and who? Who makes the decisions in the department - and how? How do the various members of the department participate in, understand, and implement them? How do new teachers come to understand the curriculum? Where do new ideas about curriculum come from, and how do they come to be accepted ideas?

In summary, we are investigating the many kinds of activities an English department engages in which involve the curriculum, all those occasions when curriculum thinking goes on. We are interested in work with the formal curriculum of the school - anything to do with writing or revising the official curriculum document which many teachers call "the curriculum." However, decisions which a department makes about curriculum go far beyond this. For example, it includes such activities as selecting the texts and books to support the curriculum, because the way those decisions are made and the reasons for making them are curricular decision affecting what students learn and how they learn it.

Curriculum work occurs when teachers share ideas for the classroom, coordinate special activities and projects for students like senior projects, implement new evaluation procedures, bring a new teacher or student teacher into the department and helping her to understand what the curriculum is. It even includes deciding who will chair the department or whose

ideas will be most respected, because those decisions too affect the curriculum. Sometimes working on "the curriculum" involves working on elements which are only understood to be part of that faculty's curriculum, or which exist because of tradition, but which are not written on paper. We are trying to understand how a department works within this framework for curriculum.

As we approached various schools, it was interesting to us to note how the English departments thought about curriculum decisions and how they defined "doing curriculum." It was rare to find a school whose concept about curriculum included the kinds of activities and decisions I listed above as curriculum thinking. Some told us that they did no curriculum work because it was handled by the district office. Others thought about curriculum work only in terms of designing and implementing new programs for a grade level. Most departments we approached operated from a conception of curriculum that was limited to the formal, printed curriculum of the school or district. These concluded that this would not be a good year for us to research because they "would not be doing curriculum that year."

The department we selected for our study was one of about 12 possible senior high schools within driving radius of our campus. It was our choice because of the reputation it had for being a strong English department, and because of the kind of curriculum work we anticipated being able to observe. Other factors helped make it interesting to us. The school is crowded and large, with

nearly the highest drop-out rate in the state: close to 25% of the seniors dropped out in 1991. Over 1700 students occupy space in grades 10-12 designed for 1100 students. The classes are large, with some enrollments over 30 students. The school has been part of a conservative, traditionally rural community, but in recent years it has moved into the crosscurrents of change. The impact of growth in near-by Boise is making it a less expensive "bedroom" community more affordable that the closer suburbs. Conservative influences on the school from the dominant Nazarene and Mormon communities are being challenged by new residents. The growing political presence of a sizeable, long-time Hispanic community is becoming a factor in the town. The school is financially strapped. In a state which ranks 48th in the US in per pupil spending, this school spends one of the smallest amounts per student in Idaho.

The school and department we did choose considered curriculum work to be ongoing, and definitely their responsibility. Their dramatically different concept about curriculum work may stem from a variety of factors. The curriculum structure of their district is teacher driven. The district's curriculum authority is vested in a curriculum council made up of teachers representing all the subject areas and grade levels. Curriculum revision is on-going and regular; the English department has recently rewritten their curriculum for literature and they are actively implementing a new set of guidelines for

this academic year.

During this school year much curriculum work has gone on, not all of it anticipated when we selected the school. Several years ago, the English department had agreed that tracking was detrimental to the students. This year is the third year without tracking, but a group of parents has been actively pressuring the school to restore AP English. The parents organization stepped up their pressure on the department's curriculum, demanding that Advanced classes, especially AP classes, be restored to the curriculum. Recently, some department members have been negotiating a curriculum settlement with the parents group, under pressure from the school board, in order to gain the parents' support for a bond election.

District finances and Teacher Association politics have actively affected departmental curriculum work. This year a prominent member of the department is the Association President, but English teachers have been leaders within the district for many years. In 1991, the school year started with a teacher strike which featured English teachers as leaders and spokespersons for the teachers. In the fall of 1993, the teachers again had not settled a contract and came close to a strike vote. Curricular disputes with the superintendent and others in the district office fueled the contract disputes. Although the contract was settled without a strike, disaffection on the part of patrons and teachers alike resulted in the

resignation of the superintendent in October, and of other key curriculum figures in the district later in the year.

Changes within the department itself have required decisions which affect decision-making processes, curricular roles which individuals play, and the curriculum itself. In October the new, young department chair resigned from teaching to take a job in industry. Within a few weeks of that change, two long-time English teachers transferred to other jobs within the district. As a result, three new, beginning teachers have joined the department. These changes have given us a window into the processes of mentoring new teachers into the school's curriculum, and into the ways in which curriculum leadership is selected and implemented.

We are only 2/3 of the way through the data-gathering phase of our research, but we see that constantly and on a daily basis decisions about curriculum are made in the life of this English department.

Part II: Our Roles as Researchers

When Driek and I began this research project in August, we were imagining our roles as participant-observers to be mostly observers. We didn't expect to be invisible; we knew that our presence in the school would probably have some effect on what

happened, and we planned to try to notice and record whatever that effect might be. And when it came time to analyze the data and to report its results, we intended to invite the teachers who are interested to join us as analysts and authors. We still do. But to the extent that we could--especially during data collection this school year--we wanted to watch carefully and try to understand how the department went about doing its work in order to understand better all the dynamics that enter into curricular decision-making in this high school English department. We wanted to understand in detail how the department went about thinking and deciding and working together. We thought of ourselves as watchers and analyzers, and later, sharers of insights that emerged.

A few of the teachers, though, have indicated that they wanted our role in their department to be more participants than observers. One day around Christmas, a teacher told me that Driek and I weren't talking enough. She explained:

> One of the problems with ethnographic researchers is that they cannot introduce things. Like, if you go in to observe this native tribe in Brazil, you can't bring in a car. And we realize that you don't want to taint us by introducing a car into our little culture here. But I don't think it's working... For one thing, we are what we are in a large part due to you and Driek. I mean I keep a research journal because of Driek's class. I have gone to her Saturday

seminars for five years. I took three different classes from her, which shaped my entire professional philosophy, and then I am doing writer's workshop because of a class I took from you. What I'm saying to you is, we decided which car we're driving in part because of you and Driek.

Among other things, this got us thinking more about our prior relationships with the teachers. As English Educators from the local university, we had met some of them in graduate courses we had taught. One of the new teachers is a graduate of our pre-professional program. So as their teachers, we had a previous history of professional mentorship and of taking an interest in their professional growth.

We had also met or conversed with some of the teachers at professional conferences. With a few, we have served on committees or worked on professional projects. (One of the teachers had been a reviewer when Driek edited the state English journal, for instance.) A few of the teachers began working with Driek in writing assessment and curriculum projects back when she was Language Arts Consultant for the state Department of Education.

In addition, two years ago, Driek spent a year's Sabbatical as an observer at this school and conducted research with four of these teachers. She spent a good deal of time watching classroom instruction and talking with those teachers about their teaching. And on a personal level, before this study a couple of the

teachers had become social friends with Driek--something we thought hard about before selecting this high school. Indicative of our work as English Educators, though, we realized we would have encountered circumstances like these in any high school in the area.

We had had prior working relationships with about half of the 14 teachers in the department, and it is mostly these teachers who seem to expect us to participate more than observe. The two who have commented the most are two of the most experienced and professionally active teachers in the department. At this early point in the study, all we can do is surmise what these teachers probably expected that we would be doing in their building this year. From their responses to us, these seem to include:

- Take a personal interest in each teacher and her/his teaching;
- Make classroom observations and offer friendly advice to individual teachers about their teaching;
- Help educate new teachers (as we had helped educate some of the experienced teachers), or maybe all of the teachers.
- More than to observe the department making decisions, to join into the decision-making, offering advice and information, and maybe even advocating a position.
- Be or become friends. (Attend social gatherings, participate in "Secret Santa," other offerings of gifts or

food, share some of our personal lives, share books and articles, be a mentor, a sounding board, a supporter, a defender, or a political adviser.)

Concerning mentorship, one of the teachers explained that the experienced teachers "mentor a lot of people informally, but I think mentors have to have mentors as well. And I think we have looked to the two of you for that role." This teacher raised an interesting question related to the way we play our researcher role at the school. She said, "It may not be that the two of you are doing it. We may be doing it. We may be saying, 'Oh gosh, they can't do this because they're in this role.'"

Those teachers who did not know us before do not seem to have these expectations of us. They have accepted our presence and appear in interviews to be glad to have someone to talk to about their teaching. They seem to see our role as one close to the role we defined at the beginning of the school year, mostly observers of them as teachers thinking alone or together with each other about curriculum, and not so much as partners in their thinking. Most of those teachers with whom we have had some prior relationships, the more experienced teachers who appear to expect us to collaborate with them, perhaps take a broader view, that Driek and I and these English teachers are <u>all</u> teachers thinking and exploring together. How could we object to such a view?

At this point, it seems to us that prior experience with researchers is a strong determiner of our teachers' expectations of us--and the degree to which we are able to determine our own roles. We intend to keep thinking about all that this implies. But at least, we assume that prior experience is likely for English Educators, who need to meet and stay in touch with language arts teachers and kids and schools, to attend local and state conferences, and are likely to teach pre-professional and professional development courses for teachers. This gives us access schools and to what enthnographers call "insider status" with teachers, which is essential if we are to learn anything beyond the superficial. But it also limits the roles we can play. For one thing, people think of us as college professors or researchers, which already confines the possibilities of our roles.

Usually in ethnography it is assumed that the hard part is to achieve insider status--to be accepted enough to be confided in, or to be let in on the inner workings of the "culture." During the first semester, we achieved insider status with all of the English teachers, naturally taking longer with some than with others, but the process was relatively accessible and smooth.

Now in the second semester, our experience is beginning to underscore how equally important it is to maintain outsider status as well, and right now that seems the hardest of the two.

Let me give you an example. In the fall, I had attended an evening open house for parents of seniors. After a general session, parents met with their children's teachers in the teachers' classrooms. I sat in on one of these, and when the subject turned to the value of AP test scores for college credit, the teacher asked me if I knew my university's policy. I did and told them, assuming I was contributing information to the discussion. But that is not how this teacher later described it. She said, "I was thinking about the meeting with the senior parents, and I particularly called upon you--to, to be validated." "Hum," I said, "how did you feel about that when I did say something?" "Well," she said, "I felt redeemed." To her, I wasn't contributing information so much as supporting and defending her, validating her own professional status in front of the parents.

In order for us to learn as much as we can about the department as a whole, and to get as complete a view of curriculum as possible, it's very important to appear to everyone to be politically unallied with any particular person or group. Because of their roles in the department, school building, district work, or ties to the community, some people are in better positions to let us in on what's going on or to give us a helpful perspective. Some people are just more articulate or perceptive than others, too, so it's natural that we spend more time with these "key informants." But the rub is that if we come

to be perceived as somehow in the same camp with one person or group--maybe just because we seem to be talking with them a lot--we risk alienating others who would now consider us not interested in, or politically allied with them--and in that way we could lose our access to their experiences and perspectives.

We did not expect to be "flies on the wall;" we have not pretended that our presence in the school would make no difference in what happens. But a few times now we think we have found ourselves pulled into the power relationships and influences we mostly wanted to observe. We now find ourselves constantly renegotiating our relationships with all of the teachers in order to maintain an interested but neutral stance, which of course is the stance of an outsider.

Part of our difficulty with maintaining some outsider status is that we like these teachers, think of them as colleagues, care about the issues they are dealing with, and we do have professional positions we itch to advocate or help we think we might offer. We wonder how much this kind of participation would pollute our research, turning the project into merely a study of ourselves. We wonder, on the other hand, if some kinds of participation would be more ethical than mostly standing back and observing.

One of the experienced teachers also voiced this concern. She referred Sondra Perl and Nancy Wilson's *Through Teachers' Eyes* and said, "I think about that teacher who was falling apart

that year. It doesn't seem ethical to me somehow. You know, when you're watching something go wrong, how long can you stand and watch it go wrong before you offer some kind of help? To watch like a biologist--watch something die and just document it dying."

I don't believe that this department is dying, but it is a good department going through a hard year. The difficulties of the department serve to push us even harder to consider the complexities of the researchers' role, a task we and the teachers have only begun.